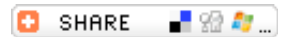


Northwest Passage

From Citizendium, the Citizens' Compendium



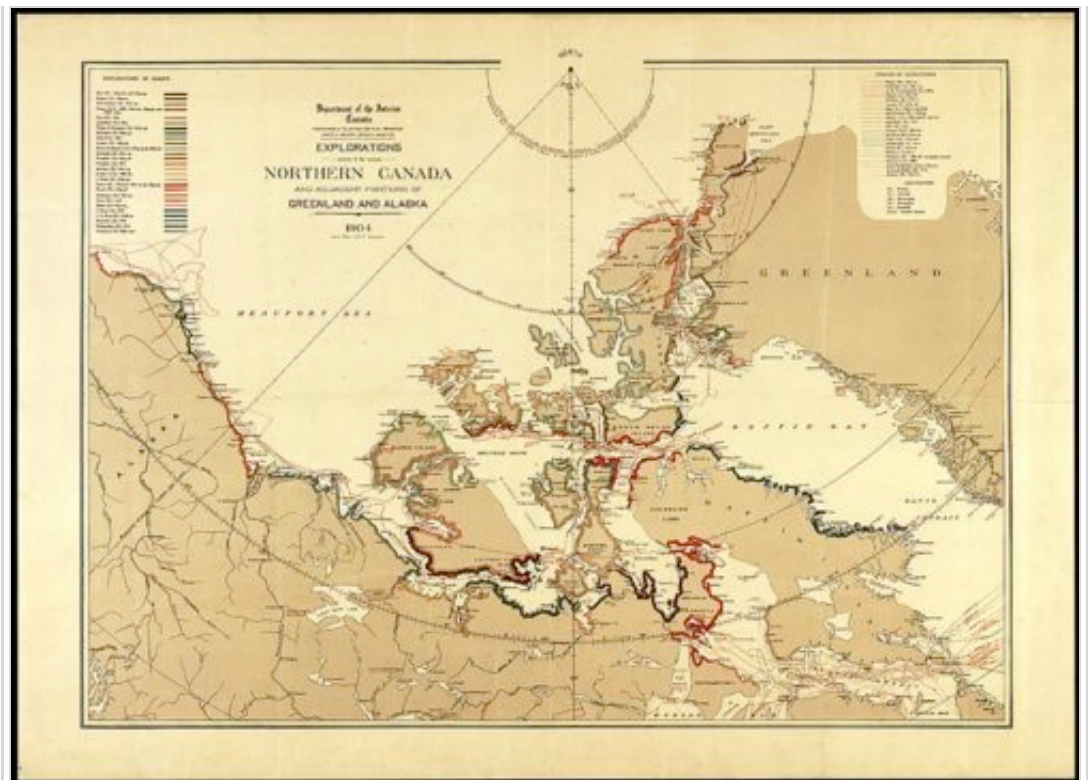
This article is about the geographical Northwest Passage; for the film see Northwest Passage (film)

The **Northwest Passage** is a long-sought water route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans north of the North American mainland. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, European explorers, particularly the British, made numerous attempts to discover such a route north and west, through (by river) or around (by sea) North America. Captain John Smith, for example, sailed up the Chesapeake Bay from



1849 depiction of the search for the Passage from the Illustrated London News

Jamestown in the early 1600s looking for a river that led to the Passage, but by the early 1800s expeditions by Samuel Hearne and Lewis and Clark had proved there was no navigable water route through the continent of North America, so the theory was shifted northward, to be an all-sea route through the Arctic Archipelago around the north of Canada. The earliest of the explorations were based on a mixture of legend, conjecture, and wishful thinking, but later expeditions built on what was learned and gradually extended their maps, at first of North America itself and then of Arctic America in particular. The largest number of expeditions in search of the passage was launched by Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, beginning in 1818 and continuing through the ill-fated expedition of Sir John Franklin in 1845, from which not a single man returned alive. The notion of an Open Polar Sea, though eventually proved chimerical as well, had a long-lasting influence on the search for the Passage and was still believed in by some navigators and geographers as late as the 1890s. Even after the claim of an Open Sea was disproved, the Passage retained its romantic allure, and when in 1905 the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen completed the first successful voyage through the Passage, the news electrified the world.



1904 map of northern Canada showing the area of the Passage

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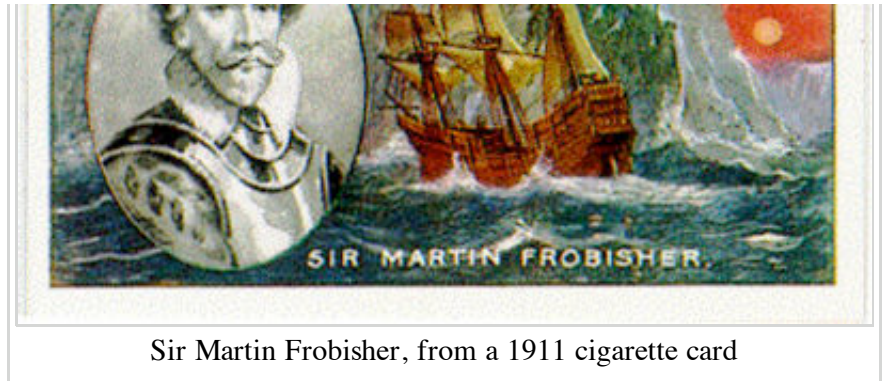
History

Earliest Attempts

The earliest attempts to find a Northwest Passage were motivated not by the quest for exploration but by the thirst for gold. The Spanish legend of the *Estrecho de*



Anián (Strait of Anián) dated back to the late Middle Ages and was already venerable in 1539 when Hernán Cortés sent Francisco de Ulloa to sail up the inland side of Baja California in search of it. It was not, however, the Spanish who were to be most persistent in this quest, but the British, whose sense of entitlement to the more "septentrional" (northerly) regions of the "New World" was first set forth by Dionyse Settle, the official propagandist for Sir Martin Frobisher's series of expeditions to the Arctic in the later 1570s:



Sir Martin Frobisher, from a 1911 cigarette card

"Svch countries and people, (good Christian Reader) which almost from the deluge, or at the least, so long as anye human creature hath had habitation on the earth, haue of late yeres, by the industrie of diligent searchers ben explored: it hath likewise pleased God, that they should be found out by those people, which for the temperature of their habitation, are most apt to atchiue the fame. As for example the Spaniards, the West Indies. Spaine is situated much more neere the Tropike of Cancer, then other Christian countries be: whereby, the Spaniards being better able to tolerate Phoebus burning beames, then others whiche are more Septentrional then they. Wherefore, I suppose them the most apte men for the inioying of the habitation of the West Indies: and especially so much, as is vexed with continual heate, or that is agreeable to their temperature, God hath bene pleased that they, as the most apt people, should both explore & inioy the same . . . [so] it hath plesed God, at this present, by the great diligence & care of our worthie countrieman, Master Martine Frobisher, in the 18. and 19. yeare of oure Queenes Maiesties reigne, to discover, for the vtilitie of his Prince and Countrie, other regions more Septentrional, then those before rehearsed: which, from the beginning, as vnknowne till now, haue bene concealed and hidden. Which discoverie, I iudge most apt for vs English men, and more agreeing to our temperature, then others aboue rehearsed." [1]

Frobisher's three voyages, the last of which in 1578 involved a whole flotilla of ships with the intent to colonize Baffin Island, were premised on the supposed gold content of black stones he found there; when the optimistic assays were proved false -- the stones were, after all, just stones -- Elizabethan explorers abandoned the plan, but the achievement of a Northwest Passage remained a long-held and much-tried dream of English navigators.

Henry Hudson

Henry Hudson was the next able navigator to take up the search for the Passage; he made two significant voyages, the first for the Dutch East India Company in 1609, on which he discovered and ascended the river which would bear his name, and the second under the dual sponsorship of the Virginia Company and the British East India Company in 1610. It was on this fateful voyage that he discovered the vast inland body of water known as Hudson Bay, which was to be the starting point for many later expeditions in



search of a Passage. Hudson and his men wintered there in 1610-1611.

For Hudson himself, alas, the bay that bore his name was also to be his grave. The men were restless in the Spring, preferring to return home rather than risk further exploration and another winter's entrapment. After circling about in James Bay in hope of finding a new outlet, Hudson was confronted with a mutiny from his crew, who feared being trapped forever in a dead-end waterway, and accused him of hoarding food. The mutineers placed Hudson and his son and seven of their supporters in a small shallop and set them adrift; they were given only scant provisions and all are presumed to have died not long after. The mutineers succeeded in navigating their way back to England, and none was ever punished for the deed.

Voyages of Delusion

The Eighteenth century, though in many regards an Age of Enlightenment, proved an era of what historian Glyn Williams has aptly dubbed "voyages of delusion" in search of the Passage. In 1719, Hudson's Bay Company official James Knight requisitioned two vessels for a search into the northwest corner of Hudson Bay, where he hoped to pursue rumours of copper deposits (this was the "Coppermine River", but Knight was misinformed as to its location). He sailed on June 5, 1719, and neither he nor his ships were ever seen again. There is some evidence that he reached Marble Island, and received food from local Inuit there; one of his vessels may have become trapped, or been scuttled, in a shallow harbor. However, the paucity of human remains at the site makes the ultimate fate of his crew an enduring mystery. In 1741, Christopher Middleton sailed from England in search of the passage, encouraged by the theories of Arthur Dobbs who was convinced that tide differences pointed to the Passage's entry being near Wager Bay. After spending his first winter at the entrance of the Churchill River in Hudson Bay, he made it as far north as Repulse Bay, where he was turned back by heavy ice conditions. In 1746, a further expedition made under Dobbs's auspices and led by William Moor and Francis Smith, sailed north, spending its first winter at York Factory. Their lack of provisions, complicated by disputes between the two leaders and James Isham, Chief Factor at York, prevented them from pursuing any of their ambitious plans.

The folly of searching for a passage through the midst of the mainland was finally made clear by Samuel Hearne's overland expedition in 1770-72. Heading north overland from fur-trading outposts, Hearne reached the mouth of the Coppermine River, without encountering any other large body of water, proving at least that no East-West Passage existed south of what was then known as the Polar Sea.

The Barrow Era

Sir John Barrow (1764-1848) longtime



David Buchan (1781-1839), long-time Second Secretary to the British Admiralty, was in an ideal position to foster his long-sought dream of achieving the Northwest Passage. In the wake of Britain's victory in the Napoleonic War, he had surplus ships and men aplenty, and the national stage vacated by war seemed an ideal platform for new triumphs in the field of exploration. He began his efforts with two expeditions, both launched in 1818 -- one to seek the Northwest Passage via Baffin Bay, and another to push for the Pole by sailing north from the Spitsbergen Islands. The first, under the command of John Ross, led to the re-mapping of Baffin Bay, and the discovery of the Polar Eskimo at Etah in Greenland, the northernmost human settlement on Earth. Nevertheless, after Ross turned back only a short distance west into Lancaster Sound, convinced the way was blocked by mountains, Barrow considered the entire voyage a failure. The second expedition, under the command of David Buchan and John Franklin, made far less progress, its ships battered by the ice-pack and forced to retreat after just barely matching the old record of 80 degrees north, but Barrow admired their spirit and recommended Franklin for a further command.



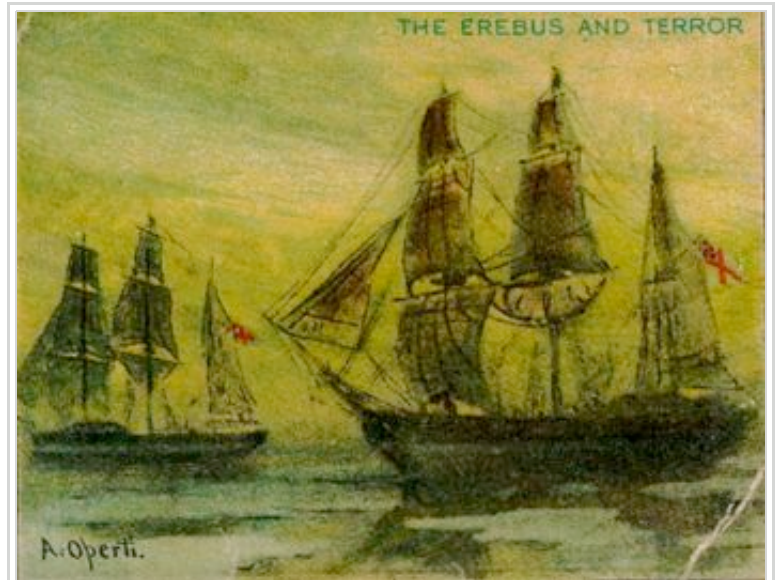
Buchan and Franklin on Spitsbergen, from an 1820 engraving

Barrow wasted no time in sending Ross's second-in-command, William Edward Parry to go where Ross had hesitated to go, and in 1819-1820 Parry enjoyed unprecedented success, passing hundreds of miles into what he dubbed "Barrow's Strait" and reaching the western extremity of Melville Island, where he spent the winter with his ships frozen in the ice, returning the next summer to claim the Parliamentary prize. Parry at once set about planning a return, but neither of his two later attempts on the Passage approached the success of the first. He then turned his attentions to the North Pole, managing to set a new northerly record of 82° 45' N. latitude before being forced to turn back when the *southerly* drift of the ice erased nearly all of his *northerly* progress.

After this last expedition, Parry went into semi-retirement, and the British Admiralty seemed to lose interest in the Passage. This left an opening for Sir John Ross, eager to erase his past embarrassment; in 1829, along with his nephew James Clark Ross he led a private expedition for the Passage funded by the London gin magnate Sir Felix Booth. The two Rosses discovered a new waterway, but it proved to be a dead end; the Rosses dubbed it the "Gulph of Boothia", and the new land to its west "Boothia" (now known as the Boothia Peninsula). Their ship the Victory trapped in the ice, they would almost certainly have perished but for the aid of the Netsilingmiut Inuit, whose village of snow huts appeared overnight on the horizon. The Inuit brought food, and assisted the Rosses with sledge expeditions, on one of which James Ross discovered the location of the North Magnetic Pole, and eventually reached his furthest west at a place he called "Victory Point". Though given up for dead by their countrymen, with the help of the Inuit and by making use of some abandoned supplies left behind by Parry, they made their way back to Barrow Strait, by then in use by commercial whalers, where they were rescued by the crew of the Isabella -- Sir John Ross's old ship. Ross returned home a conquering hero but his assurances, given to a Parliamentary committee, that further attempts on the Passage would be "absolutely useless" put a damper on this long-sought dream.

The Franklin Expedition and Search

The quest for the Passage languished after Ross's voyage, much to the consternation of Barrow, who never forgave Ross his success. It was not, however, until late in 1844 that Barrow found the backing to mount yet another attempt; James Ross was offered command, but declined, and all the other senior Arctic officers demurred in favor of Sir John Franklin, then back in England after an unhappy experience as the Governor-General of Tasmania. Franklin, despite his advanced age (59), pronounced himself fit for the undertaking, and the Admiralty outfitted HMSS "Terror" and "Erebus" for the voyage. The ships were provisioned for three years to allow for multiple winterings, and the enormous quantity of food was stored in their holds along with coal for steam engines driving screw-propellers as backup power. The ships sailed from Greenhithe in May of 1845, and were last seen by a whaling captain in the Davis Straits in July; from that day forth, they were never seen alive by white men again.



Franklin's ships "Erebus" and "Terror", painted by Albert Operti

The Admiralty, having assured the public that "the name of Franklin is a national guarantee of success", refused to mount a search expedition even after two winters without news. In 1849, they dispatched James Clark Ross with two ships, the Enterprise and Investigator; Ross made it only partway into the Barrow Straits, and his sledge parties found no trace of Franklin's ships or men. In 1850, further expeditions sailed, private and public, from both Great Britain and the United States. These discovered the site of Franklin's first winter harbor on Beechey Island, marked by the remains of an anvil, an observatory, and the three desolate graves of the expedition's first casualties.

Additional searches, including one by a flotilla of ships under the command of the unfortunate (and unfortunately-named) Admiral Belcher in 1852-54, found no further traces. Belcher, panicked when most of his ships were trapped in the ice, ordered a mass abandonment and return on the remaining vessels; his reward was a court martial. One of his ships, HMS Resolute managed to slip its ice-moorings on its own, and drifted crewless as far as the southern end of the Davis Straits. Found and piloted back to harbor by an American whaling captain, the Resolute was restored to perfect working order and presented to Queen Victoria as a gift. The Queen was so touched by this gesture that, years later when the Resolute was scrapped, she had a desk made from its timbers and presented to U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes; every president since, except Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Ford, has used this desk.



Franklin graves on Beechey Island (2004 photo)

One unexpected consequence of the Franklin search was the experience of Commander Robert McClure. Entering the Passage from the West in command of HMS Investigator in 1850, he departed from his orders and pressed further into the inland waterway, with the result that his ship became hopelessly frozen in near Banks Island. Several attempts to scout the land and locate other parties failed, and the ship's entire crew was eventually debilitated by scurvy and short rations when, against all hope, Lieutenant Pym, on a sledge expedition from one of Belcher's ships, located the survivors. Returning home with Belcher's squadron, McClure was awarded £10,000 for his efforts, though some -- Lady Jane Franklin's party among them -- thought very little of his claim of having achieved the Passage, given that he did not do so on a single ship, and that part of the journey was by sledge.

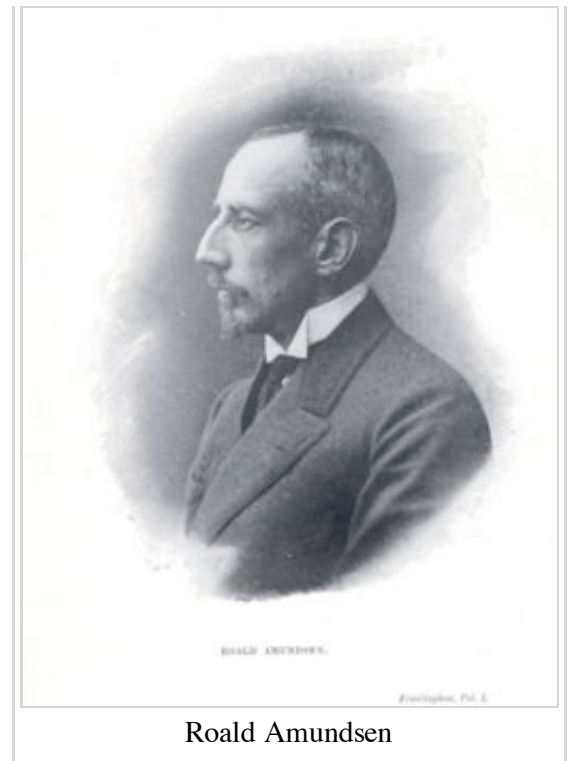
With the advent of the Crimean War, the British government abandoned all search efforts, and declared that Franklin and his men had died in the line of duty. Franklin's widow, Lady Jane Franklin, unable to persuade the Prime Minister to act, funded her own private expedition under the command of Sir Leopold McClintock. Sailing in 1857, McClintock lost a year to the unpredictable ice, but finally in 1859 discovered the last traces of the Franklin expedition. The "Terror" and "Erebus" had been abandoned, and much of their supplies lay scattered on the ice of King William Island; a note found in a cairn nearby declared that Franklin had died in 1847, and that in 1848 Captain Frances Crozier had led the survivors south to the Great Fish River. None of them ever was seen again by European or American searchers, but in later years, the Inuit told of several encounters. The men had been thin, and sickly-looking; their gums were blackened (probably from scurvy) and they were hauling a large whaleboat. The next season, the Inuit found tents full of dead bodies, along with signs that the last survivors had turned to cannibalism to support themselves. This claim of cannibalism was later verified by forensic analysis of bones recovered near the site.^[2]

Although the Franklin expedition was a failure, the thirty-odd search expeditions sent after it succeeded in mapping much of the inland Arctic waters of North America, and Lady Franklin was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographic Society for her efforts.

Amundsen

That a Norwegian explorer should snatch the laurels of the

That a Norwegian explorer should snatch the honors of the Passage after a century of effort by Britain shocked many in London, the more so since Roald Amundsen found success by rejecting almost all of the "noble" British traditions. The British sent enormous former warships; Amundsen took a converted herring boat; the British scorned Inuit diet and clothing; Amundsen adapted them; the British relied on men to haul supplies; Amundsen learned to use dogs. And yet, despite this, it was Sir John Franklin, the ill-starred British explorer, whose tale Amundsen himself credited with inspiring his great undertaking; in his journal, he wrote that he wished to join Franklin "in all his great sufferings." After studying navigation surreptitiously (his father wished for him to become a doctor), he gained his first polar experience on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition of 1897-1899. In 1903, with a crew of six hand-picked men aboard the small (70 ft) sloop Gjøa, he sailed (narrowly avoiding debt-collectors who wished to seize the vessel), he embarked on his transit of the Passage. Having stopped to pay his respects to the Franklin expedition graves at Beechey Island, he sailed southwest, wintering on King William Island at a place he dubbed Gjoa Haven (now the site of a permanent Inuit settlement). He spent the winter learning about traditional clothing, diet, and dog-driving from the local Inuit, skills he would later employ in his successful attempt on the South Pole. On numerous occasions, Amundsen's vessel skirted shallow waters that would have grounded any of the large vessels traditionally sent to explore the Passage. Finally, after two winters, the Gjøa reached the end of the Arctic Archipelago on August 17th, 1905. Having no other means of notifying the world of his achievement, Amundsen had to sledge five hundred miles from Nome to Eagle Creek, Alaska, the site of the nearest telegraph station, from which the world learned in December of 1905 that he had achieved this long-sought dream.



Modern Traverses and Commercial Use

From the time of Amundsen's achievement to the late twentieth century, traverses of the Passage remained few and remarkable. In 1940-42, the RCMP vessel the St. Roch, under the command of Harry Larsen, traversed the Passage from West to East, the first vessel to do so; in 1944 the ship completed the East-West Passage in a single season. In 1969 the SS Manhattan, a specially converted tanker fitted with an ice-breaking bow, made the trip, showing at least that commercial use was possible. It was not, however, until the early twenty-first century that warmer temperatures have made the Passage reliably clear of ice for a significant part of the year, and even then ice conditions are unpredictable.

Dispute on international status

Canada regards the Passage as lying within its territorial waters, while other nations (especially the United States) regard it as an international waterway. The result is a long-simmering dispute between Canada and the U.S. on the question of Canadian sovereignty. Canadians were incensed when Americans drove the reinforced oil tanker Manhattan through the Northwest Passage in 1969, followed by the icebreaker Polar Sea in 1985, both without asking for Canadian permission. In 1970, the Canadian government enacted the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act, which asserts Canadian regulatory control over pollution within a 100-mile

zone. In response, the Americans in 1970 stated, "We cannot accept the assertion of a Canadian claim that the Arctic waters are internal waters of Canada.... Such acceptance would jeopardize the freedom of navigation essential for United States naval activities worldwide." A compromise of sorts was reached in 1988, by an agreement on "Arctic Cooperation," which pledges that voyages of American icebreakers "will be undertaken with the consent of the Government of Canada." However the agreement did not alter either country's basic legal position. In January 2006 David Wilkins, the American ambassador to Canada, said his government opposes Stephen Harper's proposed plan to deploy military icebreakers in the Arctic to detect interlopers and assert Canadian sovereignty over those waters. [3]

The Passage in Popular Culture

In 1889, Mark Twain, in his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, had his protagonist explain the Quest for the Grail by comparing it to the Northwest Passage:

"The boys all took a flier at the Holy Grail now and then. It was a several years' cruise. They always put in the long absence snooping around, in the most conscientious way, though none of them had any idea where the Holy Grail really was, and I don't think any of them actually expected to find it, or would have known what to do with it if he *had* run across it. You see, it was just the Northwest Passage of that day, as you may say; that was all. Every year expeditions went out holy grailing, and next year relief expeditions went out to hunt for *them*. There was worlds of reputation in it, but no money. Why, they actually wanted *me* to put in! Well, I should smile."

The Canadian folksinger Stan Rogers's song *Northwest Passage* has frequently been cited as the quintessential musical embodiment of the search for the passage; some even have referred to it as Canada's unofficial national anthem. [4]

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2. ↑ "The Final Days of the Franklin Expedition: New Skeletal Evidence", by Anne Keenleyside, Margaret Bertulli and Henry C. Fricke. *Arctic* Vol 50, No 1 - March 1997 pp. 36 - 46
3. ↑ Matthew Carnaghan, Allison Goody, "Canadian Arctic Sovereignty" (Library of Parliament: Political and Social Affairs Division, 26 January 2006) at [1] (<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb0561-e.htm>) ; 2006 news at [2] (<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2006/01/26/wilkins-harper060126.html>)
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